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ABSTRACT

In order to improve their students' skills in self-expression, teachers should emphasize the importance of tone, an awareness of what is being said, and an appreciation of the effect of words on an audience. They need to foster in their students an interest in and a perspective on language, its history, and the human and social attitudes which language reflects. Stress should be placed on the fundamentals of spelling, on the reasons behind punctuation rules, on writing clarity and conciseness, and on the usefulness of parallelism and subordination for accurate, fluent self-expression. These techniques of composition, however, will be of little value unless the student-writer has something worthwhile to say and has coherently ordered his ideas. (MF)

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LANGUAGE, COMPOSITION, AND THE STUDENT

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A little more than two years ago, the following letter arrived at my desk, as such letters have a way of doing.

> Department of English
> University of Wisconsin
> Madison, Wisconsin
>
> Dear Sirs:
>
> I am asking the University English teachers to help me with my term paper. My subject being "Slang in America", I am making a survey of the use of slang in the colleges and schools in Wisconsin.
>
> If you could give me some information on Slang, both written and spoken around the University, I would appreciate it very much. I would also like samples of written slang, if possible.
>
> Please send me this information as soon as possible. Thank you.
>
> Sincerely,

This letter undeniably has its virtues; the letter-heading, the spelling, the punctuation are all correct; the language is direct, clear, and businesslike. Whether it rouses the reader to immoderate laughter at its ignorance or to impulses toward mayhem because of its bland presumptuousness is open to question. What it says, in slightly different words, is "Dear Sirs: I demand that as members of a department of English you turn your attention, individually and collectively, to the satisfaction of my wish to know about campus slang. Because of the self-evident importance of this request, I further ask that you drop whatever work you may be engaged in at the moment and send your reply post-haste."

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What makes the situation all the more damning is that the young lady who wrote the letter certainly did not intend to produce such an impression: the damnation must fall, in large measure, on the teacher or teachers who taught — or in this case, didn't teach — her to write letters. What is wrong here, as any semanticist will tell us, is the tone — a quality difficult to define, but not at all difficult to illustrate. When Jonathan Swift wrote "A Modest Proposal," his unimpassioned tone of calm reasonableness contrasted so strongly with his outrageous suggestions for the treatment of the Irish that readers were stirred to indignation. A more recent example is a letter written by a lawyer who had been trying to get a government loan from the Reconstruction Finance Corporation for his client, who offered some Louisiana real estate as collateral. The lawyer succeeded in establishing clear title back to 1803, but on submitting it was told that he must trace the title to an even earlier date. The lawyer replied:

> I was unaware that any educated man in the world failed to know that Louisiana was purchased from France in 1803. The title to the land was acquired by France by right of conquest from Spain.
>
> The land came into possession of Spain by right of discovery made in 1492 by a sailor named Christopher Columbus, who had been granted the privilege of seeking a new route to India by the then reigning monarch, Isabella.
>
> The good queen, being a pious woman and careful about titles, almost, I might say, as the RFC, took the precaution of securing the blessing of

> the Pope upon the voyage before she sold her jewels to help Columbus.
>
> Now the Pope, as you know, is the emissary of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and God, who, it is commonly accepted, made the world.
>
> Therefore I believe it is safe to presume that He also made that part of the U.S. called Louisiana, and I hope to hell you are satisfied.

It would be difficult to mistake the tone of that letter, which is the tone of ill-restrained exasperation of someone trying to make his ideas perfectly clear to an imbecilic child.

Important as tone is to writing, the difficulty about it is that many people simply do not recognize it — witness the schoolgirls' letter which was my Exhibit A. Or go back to Daniel Defoe's "The Shortest Way with Dissenters," which tried to use the Swiftian shock technique, and failed because most of his readers took him literally. The repressive measures he urged against the dissenting sects seemed eminently reasonable to the conservative country squires who read the pamphlet, while they outraged the dissenters themselves, who believed that they had been betrayed by one of their own.

Again, a more up-to-date illustration: in an issue of *Life* magazine in the summer of 1964, a reviewer exercised his powers of sarcasm in satirizing a phonograph recording which professed to give the listeners the absolute high points of most of the great composers. The title of the review — "Music to Acquire Couth By" — one would think gives a clear enough indication of the line which the review intended to follow, which in general was, "Why should busy people listen to hours of dull music to get these sparkling gems which represent Mozart, Beethoven, et. al. at their very greatest?"

The week after the review appeared, *Life* printed the following two letters:

> Sirs: The article "Music to Acquire Couth By", by Chris Welles, was so funny and delightful that I read it, then reread it, then read it to two or three friends just for the pleasure of enjoying the wit."
>
> Sirs: Chris Welles has a very distorted and pessimistic view of great composers and their music. The longer musical masterpieces lasting, say, over 30 minutes, do *not* consist of only a few great moments, with the rest being 'unwanted listening.' Mr. Welles is undoubtedly a musical dilettante. Perhaps if he does not want to take the time to listen to a complete composition, he should not listen to music at all.

For many an adult, and many of our students, the sense of a statement consists only of its literal sense; connotations are unimportant. A high school student, asked to explain the meaning of Macbeth's question to the doctor after Lady Macbeth's collapse: "Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased,/Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow," allegedly translated it as "Can't you do anything to help a nut?" According to Fred Stocking, writing in an issue of the Merriam Webster Word Study pamphlet, another student paraphrased Keat's "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter," as "Music is nice to hear, but it's even nicer when it stops."

If examples like these show how insensitive some people are to the precise meanings of what they read, what wonder that their writing and speech reflect a similar unawareness of what they are suggesting. How many teachers, after returning a graded set of papers, have overheard a conversation something like the following?

> Student A. "What'd you get?"
> Student B. "I got an A. What'd you get?"
> Student A. "He gave me a D."

An adult, whose car has left the road because it was driven too fast around a curve will report — if he survives the accident — "The car went out of control."

Unlike the writer of the letter with which I began, the people here cited are suggesting what they intend, but they are equally unaware of what they are suggesting, and of whether their suggestions will stand up under logical scrutiny. What does it profit for teachers of composition to teach spelling, punctuation, and correct usage so long as their students are naively unaware of what they are saying, and of the effect their words will have on their audience? If the study — I hesitate to say, the science — of semantics has accomplished nothing else, it has emphasized language as an expression of the human and social values which underlie it. As Hayakawa defined semantics in his *Language and Thought in Action,* it is "the study of human interaction through the mechanisms of linguistic communication." One need not accept the more extravagant claims made for semantics as a remedy for individual, social, and international problems to believe that our students will read more perceptively, think more rationally, and write more effectively if they are brought to recognize what "human interaction" language can produce.

The starting-point for such a recognition is simply developing an interest in language. "Simply" may not seem to be the right word, yet many a teacher has found that even very young students enjoy the stories connected with words like *pastor* and *congregation, assassin, lunatic, curfew,* and *bonfire,* or words created from the names of people *(derrick, dunce, sandwich)* or places *(sardine, hamburger, bedlam, canary).* Two female saints have given us the words *tawdry* and *maudlin.* The origin of baptismal and family names offers another opportunity for exploration. The outlines of language history, with the innumerable contributions to vocabulary by peoples from all parts of the earth, will be of value and interest. So will a number of language phenomena, ranging from the linguistic misadventures of Mrs. Malaprop ("as headstrong as an allegory on the banks of the Nile") and Canon Spooner ("our queer Dean") through the creation of telescoped words like *chortle, lubratorium,* and *infanticipate* and of words formed from initials like *YMCA, radar,* and *UNESCO,* to the more fundamental and important processes of generalization and specialization, elevation and degradation of meaning which bring us back to semantics again. To trace the processes whereby our word *silly* derives from the meaning "blessed" or "holy", or *nice* from "ignorant" or *villain* from "farm laborer" is to throw light on some aspects of psychology. If *stewardess* ought literally to mean "female in charge of a pig-sty," what happened to prevent such a meaning? When did *undertaker* acquire the specialized meaning it now has? And why did undertakers start calling themselves *morticians?* Why are rat and insect killers *exterminators?* or garbage collectors *sanitary engineers?* In short, what human and social attitudes and impulses does language reflect? An interest in language, an awareness of it, is certainly a first step toward a better command over it.

In establishing such an interest and awareness, it sometimes helps to step outside the enfolding sheath of language for a moment and see it as a foreigner does. One foreigner studying in the United States asked, "Why are you Americans always assuring other people that you are telling the truth? You keep saying 'As a matter of fact . . . as a matter of fact.' If what you are saying isn't a fact, why would you say it? Also, you say 'How do you do?' when you are introduced to someone, and the other person never tells you; he says 'How do you do?' right back." Try giving that foreigner an account of our use of rather meaningless verbal fillers and social formulas; you may find it not easy to do. The same foreigner, or perhaps a different one, asks us how we indicate in speech that we are asking a question. We probably answer "We raise the pitch of our voices at

the end of a question." The foreigner replies "Then why don't I do it at the end of *this* question?"

In a description of a high school humanities program I examined some time ago appears the following informational tidbit: "The writing of Sumeria is divided into a male and female language . . . a male language, harsh in tone . . . taboo for women . . . a softer toned female language, disdained by the males . . . . The Campas Indians in the Amazon jungle similarly have a male and female language." "How queer!" we say. But in a recording entitled *A Word in Your Ear,* Dr. Walter Goldschmidt gives an illustration of an American male speaking the female language of our culture: "I don't want to be catty, but my dear it was simply too terrible. I really thought I should have died! I just wanted to sink right through the floor! My gracious me, I thought, if Bert and Charlie aren't wearing that same cunning Homburg hat!" I hope that the intended moral is clear; let us turn, at least at times, from our spelling lists, usage lists, workbooks, sentence diagrams, and definitions of the parts of speech to give our students some perspectives on our language — on its uses as a social instrument, its fascinating history which reflects changes in our culture, its use as a vehicle to convey our personal attitudes, feelings, and prejudices.

When we turn our attention from the language to our students' use of it we are sometimes appalled — and with good reason. From a single set of test papers written by college seniors preparing to teach English, I found the familiar misspellings which most of us have been combatting from the time our students began writing — *loosing* for *losing, it's* for *its, their* for *there, your* for *you're.* More picturesque confusions of forms appeared in *cloths* for *clothes, moral* for *morale, coma* for *comma.* One student said that students should do their *upmost* to *eject* their personalities into their writing. In spite of the imperfect correspondence of sound to spelling in English, which permits writers to make a great number of understandable spelling errors, many of the mistakes violated the rules that do exist: I found *taged* (tagged), *starring* (staring) *occuring* (occurring), *repetion* (repetition), and *monotous* (monotonous). With almost every sweep of the scythe, teachers can harvest a similar crop of monstrosities.

To complete a catalog of possible transgressions against the language in students' writing would be almost an endless task. Errors in the case of pronouns, unorthodox verb-forms, dangling modifiers, failures of verbs to agree with subjects and of pronouns to point to clear antecedents face us on every side; sentences are childishly short or rambling and shapeless; punctuation is mistaken or almost non-existent; sentence fragments and run-ons abound; diction is vague or confused or inappropriate; sentences are tangled and incoherent, paragraphs are shapeless and illogical.

As Hercules must have wondered before he started to cleanse the Augean stables, we teachers wonder, "Where do we start?" I believe that we must begin by establishing some prioritis. In spelling, we should bear down on the most frequent and most flagrant errors, which carry the heaviest social penalties — the kind I have already illustrated. In punctuation, we should give primary attention to violations which cause serious misunderstandings of meaning, easily enough illustrated from student themes. It also helps to group punctuation marks according to their logical functions, as Harold Whitehall suggested in his book, *Structural Essentials of English.* Insofar as changes in pause and pitch in spoken English reflect the need for punctuation in writing, the voice-test is a good one to have students apply. In cases of loose and misleading modification, the ridiculous results can be made clear by illustration: "In *Hamlet* we see the King swallow

poison, which is something we all enjoy", or "While stirring the soup, the cat pounced on Dick's mother."

Still, when we have edited and proof-read and battled ourselves to exhaustion over the faults and blemishes in the writing of our students, we must feel that our efforts have been largely negative: we have been fighting against poor writing, rather than for good writing. The positive virtues of thoughtfulness, of clear organization and effective illustration, of forceful diction and well-planned, well-constructed sentences remain to be achieved. Our task in helping to achieve them is made more difficult by the age of gobbledegook in which we live. A sociologist's version of the opening of the Twenty-third Psalm reads as follows:

> The Lord is my external-internal integrative mechanism. I shall not be deprived of gratifications for my viscerogenic hungers or my need-disposition. He motivates me to orient myself towards a nonsocial object with effective significance. He positions me in a nondecisional situation. He maximizes my adjustment.

To the kind of language represented here can be contrasted Churchill's "I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat," Benjamin Franklin's "They that can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety," Franklin Roosevelt's "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself," and Lincoln's "That this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom." Even our ablest students are not immune from the disease of bigwordism and foggy phrasing. I quote from a theme written for me by a college freshman:

> The incentive for my investigation is a curiosity of my ability to assimilate alcohol and of my capacity for it. My purpose is to submit an almost universal conclusion of the potency of alcohol to an individual's experimental verification because of the relativeness of the effects of alcohol to a person's physical and psychic makeup.

Here is a translation:

> Since I'm curious to know how I react to alcohol and how much I can drink, I'm going to experiment. Everyone knows alcohol is potent, but its effects on the mind and body are different in different people. That is why I want to see what it does to me.

Why did the student write in such a grotesque style? Presumably he wanted to impress me. He did, but not in the way he intended.

By way of contrast, here is a passage which Professor Martin Joos of the University of Wisconsin distributed to one of his summer session classes of teachers to get their opinions of it. The writer describes his school experiences as follows:

> The trouble was arithmetic and grammar. My thick skull for mathematics was a source of humiliation. For a year or two I slaved over the subject. As a spur I announced my intention of becoming a civil engineer. The results of these efforts were peculiar. Occasionally I would come up with the solution of a complicated problem — and then miss a string of simple ones. This created suspicions that I had been helped with the hard problem. So, in the end, I just gave up mathematics.
>
> Grammar I wasn't obliged to give up, not having paid it any mind to begin with. I had no intention of doing so now. My position on grammar was that it served no useful purpose. This business of learning which words were verbs and which words nouns; what was the subject of a sentence and what the predicate; and that mumbo-jumbo about moods and tenses — there seemed no more sense to it than learning the alphabet backward (which one teacher required her kids to do). My teachers and my parents

> said grammar was necessary, to know how to read and write properly. *Bushwa.* As often as any other kid I was asked to read my compositions before the class.

It may be beside the point to report that this passage written by Pulitzer prize-winner Marquis James was treated severely by most of the teachers in Professor Joos's class; he himself admits that his having asked them to "criticize" it, along with the heretical sentiments expressed, probably had much to do with the teachers' disapproval. My actual point is the contrast between the wooly, nebulous, pretentious prose previously quoted and the simplicity, directness, and vigor of the passage from James. His intention and tone are unmistakable, and his attempt to capture the attitude and style of the twelve-year-old boy is on the whole successful.

Another point emerges from what he has to say. If grammar has any usefulness in improving writing, teachers have generally managed to conceal that usefulness from students. Countless multitudes of them must feel exactly as Marquis James did — that grammar is a meaningless mumbo-jumbo entirely unrelated to successful writing. Repeatedly we hear statements from specialists in the teaching of English to the same effect: that there has been no demonstrable correlation between a student's knowledge of grammar and his ability to write. Paradoxically, this belittlement of the value of grammar as a school subject is being accompanied by greater attention to it than ever before, largely through the rise of new systems: first the structural or descriptive linguistics approach, next the generative-transformational, and ultimately goodness knows what. Some scholars are trying to bridge the gap between form and meaning by developing a science of metalinguistics, some are attempting to see how the study of sentence-structure can be extended to larger structures, like a paragraph or a short poem: Henry Lee Smith and other are working on discourse analysis, Kenneth Pike on tagmemics. Immediate constituent analysis is being refined, a system of slot-and-filler techniques developed. H. A. Gleason, whose book *Linguistics and English Grammar* is the best survey of past accomplishments, present grammatical systems, and probable future developments, darkly hints that he is working on still another system which he will spring on us one of these days. Ralph Long even has a good word for the achievements of scholarly traditional grammar. A suitable motto for the situation is the inscription on the Archives Building in Washington: "What's past is prologue." — or, as translated by a Washington cabdriver, "You ain't seen nothing yet."

As the systems evolve and revolve, students continue to write as they always have, most of them indirectly and wordily like the politician described by Sir Winston Churchill as able to compress a maximum of words into a minimum of thought. Here are some examples; the translations are mine:

> It was simply a case of his failure to recognize the ability of the majority of the students which was to act as intelligent persons and not childish individuals. (He simply failed to recognize that most students can act intelligently rather than childishly.)
>
> Every morning the inadequate bus service causes complaints from the many individuals who ride the buses. The reason that they complain is due to the fact that the bus is always crowded and congested and is uncomfortable. (Every morning the bus-riders complain of slow schedules, crowding, and discomfort.)

In spite of what students and authorities on the teaching of English say about the inapplicability of grammar to the improvement of writing, I should like to point out that any betterment I achieved through my translations came about through the application of two of the most important grammatical principles in

English. One is the use of parallel grammatical structures, as when I summarized the bus-riders complaints in the list "slow schedules, crowding, and discomfort." The other is the existence of different levels of modification or subordination, which I used to reduce and tighten up the other wordy, sprawling example. There is nothing mysterious about either parallelism or reduction of predication, yet most of our students cannot use these devices with any skill, although even the youngest school children use them both after a fashion. The little girl describing a pet may say, "I have a little kitten. It has gray fur. It has bright green eyes. It has a long, wavy tail." Those may remain as separate coordinate statements, or be strung together with "and." A considerable step forward is made when the child learns to reduce the series of sentences to a series of modified nouns functioning as objects of a preposition "I have a little kitten with gray fur, bright green eyes, and a long, wavy tail." At the other end of the ladder of rhetorical sophistication are such uses of parallelism as Lincoln's Second Inaugural:

> With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and his orphan — to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves, and with all nations."

Of course, teachers of English are not trying to nudge their students to the top of the rhetorical ladder, there to perch incongruously with the shade of Abraham Lincoln. What teachers would like is to get them to rise above the level of the little girl and her kittens. But because our students often have little sense of what grammatical structures can be made parallel, what they produce for us are misshapen monstrosities like the following, all from my theme-file:

> 1. I wanted very much to startle a rabbit, send it bolting, and letting loose a spread of shot.
> 2. Also the average person can save money only by refraining from excess purchases and to buy only the cheapest necessities.
> 3. Our greatest problem was time, when would we have time to do our work, with school and also each of us has another outside job.
> 4. I know a certain girl who has carrot-red hair, pleasingly plump, and happy-go-lucky.
> 5. Father said the gas consumption was high, it leaked oil, the muffler was just about shot, the lights weren't much good, and finally finished with a remark about the baldness of the tires.

In this final illustration, the student shows some knowledge of how to use a series of parallel clauses, but he hasn't learned to make them all parallel. In this instance, as in the others cited, it would seem worth while to teach the main structural elements of single word, phrase, and clause which can be joined in a series.

Along with parallelism, subordination should be taught very thoroughly. Its practical value in improving writing should be obvious, yet developing skill in its use has been generally neglected. When I ask the seniors in my college course in the teaching of English what subordination means, they tell me that it means turning a main clause into a dependent clause. Pressed for further detail, they remain silent. Presumably they have all learned that there are single modifiers called adjectives and adverbs, and that various kinds of phrases can function adverbially or adjectivally. Together with the clause level of modification, the phrase and word levels furnish the writer with several choices which he can make in accordance with the amount of emphasis the subordinated idea merits. He can deliberately experiment with the three levels of modification to determine which best suits his intention, which produces a sentence that says as directly as possible

what he wants to say. For example, he writes, "Any sheets of paper which are found to have imperfections should be discarded." If the sentence seems a bit wordy, he can reduce the relative clause to a prepositional phrase, "Any sheets of paper with imperfections should be discarded." The third choice is to reduce the phrase to a single adjective, "Any imperfect sheets of paper should be discarded."

In the examples just given, the differences achieved by the use of the three different levels of modification are not great, but when we examine some of the wordy, sprawling sentences that student writers produce, the choice of the phrase or word modifier can make a considerable difference. A student writes: "The reason that I gave for doing myself this job which needed to be done was that the workman who usually did this job was prevented from doing it by circumstances over which we had no control." One way of dealing with a sentence like this is to write *wordy* or *awk* in the margin. Such a notation does nothing to show the student what can be cut to make it less wordy, or what can be done to *unawk* it. But by examining the levels of modification, one can turn "The reason that I gave" into "My reason"; "this job which needed to be done" into "this necessary job"; "the workman who usually did this job" into "the regular workman" and "prevented . . . by circumstances over which he had no control" into "unavoidably prevented." The sentence which results is a great improvement over the original: "My reason for doing this necessary job myself was that the regular workman was unavoidably prevented from doing it." Once the sentence arrives at this stage of comparative clarity, the writer has a chance to see that a still more direct version could be even better: "I did this necessary job myself because the regular workman was unavoidably prevented from doing it."

If the teaching of grammar has actually done nothing to help students write better, perhaps the right grammar has not been taught or applied to that end. If true, this is the more surprising in that no new systems of grammar need be used: teachers need not conduct immediate-constituent analyses or cultivate any forests of generative trees. They will need to take a very few grammatical concepts out of the textbook and apply them to writing.

My suggestions for producing better composition through the study of language are admittedly heterogeneous, nor will they alone achieve this end. The writer must still have something worth-while to say and he must plan a coherent ordering of his ideas in the whole composition and the individual paragraphs. There is little use in teaching a student to subordinate until he has succeeded in getting logically related ideas into the same neighborhood. The following paragraph was written for me many years ago by a ninth grade boy:

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

> He was a nice man. He used to sit by the hour and tell funny stories. You couldn't get anything over on him, he always had a combat (comeback?). He grew up from poverty, he had to make his own living, to the President of the United States of America. He was a swell president. He saved the union. He used to read by the light of the fireplace. He would write on a shovel with charcoal. He had a lot of hardships. I found him interesting because he was a nice man. He done a lot to the country. He saved the union from being separated. He used to chop wood for other farmers to get a little money. He would go without shoes. He was shot by Booth Tarkington.

If the study of language will not solve all problems of writing, most teachers would settle — at least for a start — for the student who shows sensitivity to the

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exact meanings of words, who takes account of the effect his language will have on the reader, who regards English with interest and respect, and shows some ability to revise his writing in the direction of economy and straightforwardness. The teacher who can help his student advance towards such goals is more than worthy of his hire.